

Diplomacy in the Modern Era
(Robert R. Reilly, May 25, 2011)

Transcript available below

About the speaker

Robert R. Reilly is director of the Westminster Institute. He has been on the board since its founding. In his 25 years of government service, he has taught at [National Defense University](#) (2007), and served in the Office of The Secretary of Defense, where he was Senior Advisor for Information Strategy (2002-2006). He participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 as Senior Advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of information. Before that, he was director of the Voice of America, where he had worked the prior decade. Mr. Reilly served in the White House as a Special Assistant to the President (1983-1985), and in the U.S. Information Agency both in D.C. and abroad. In the private sector, he spent more than seven years with the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, as both national director and then president. He was on active duty as an armored cavalry officer for two years, and attended Georgetown University and the Claremont Graduate University. He has published widely on foreign policy, the “war of ideas”, and classical music.

Transcript

Robert R. Reilly:

Thank you, Katie, and thank you Patrick and John Moore for your very kind remarks about my book, [*The Closing of the Muslim Mind*](#). I can really sum that up for you. The central thesis of that book in one sentence the kind of Islam about which Stephen Ulph and Patrick Sookhdeo were speaking, is a spiritual pathology based on a deformed theology that has produced a dysfunctional culture. A spiritual pathology based on a deformed theology that has produced a dysfunctional culture. Well, that is about it. Any questions?

Actually, my job today is not to talk about the subject of my book but about the war of ideas in public diplomacy and you have already heard some remarks about it. Actually, in the course of my 25 years in government – not successively – I spent most of it in public diplomacy in the U.S. Information Agency, in the Reagan White House, in the State Department, oversees, at the Voice of America for more than 10 years, and with the Defense Department both here and in the Middle East, so I have seen public diplomacy work and I have seen it not work.

Unfortunately, most of my experience has been in the latter category and this, our failure in the current war of ideas. By the way, it seems to be unanimously proclaimed upon. Consider this recent statement. Quote, “We are losing the war of ideas because we are not in the arena the way we were in the Cold War just at the moment when there is this ferment for democracy breaking out,” unquote.

Guess who said that? Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her recent congressional testimony. It is worth listening to a few other of her words which I shall quote here, “We invested so much money and effort over so many decades to get behind the Iron Curtain to talk about what democracy was, to keep the flag of freedom unfurled in people’s hearts, to get our messages in through every means of shortwave radio and smuggling bibles, and we did all kinds of things just to give people a sense that they were not alone and that maybe their ideas about the human spirit were not subversive. Well, we do not have those messages going out,” unquote.

When is the last time we smuggled a Bible anywhere? We do not have those messages going out anymore. Why is that? Well, there are two possible answers. We have lost the means to get the message out and we have lost the message. Unfortunately, both of these things are true and in the little time we have remaining I am just going to have to radically telescope my remarks here.

John Lenczowski mentioned the elimination of the U.S. Information Agency in 1999. Why do you suppose that happened? Why would we eliminate the principal U.S. government institution responsible for fighting our side in a war of ideas? Why would we do that? ...the what? The principal because we won, right, and part of this was supposed to be part of the peace dividend.

In fact, it was expressed most powerfully in those days by Francis Fukuyama and the title of his book, *The End of History*. History had ended in the sense that for a democratic constitutional form of government with the free market stood uncontested morally throughout the world as the model and all we would see is more quickly or slowly this model being implemented throughout the world depending upon local circumstances, right? What is the logical conclusion if that view prevailed? Well, you dismantle your institutions designed to fight in that war of ideas.

I remember Dr. Joseph Duffy, the last director of U.S.I.A. I was at VOA at the time and he testified on [the] hill about our international broadcasting and he said, "I am not sure we should be broadcasting to the world. We should be listening to it." Oh, the appropriators got out their red pens and there went a lot of the funds for broadcasting.

However, there was another version of the end of history that was not Hegelian. It was written in an article by Salman al Aude, a Saudi who saw history culminating in a slightly different way, not with the triumph of free-market democracy but with the destruction of the United States, and surprise, history resumed on 9/11 at least for the Hegelians. For the rest of us it had simply continued, but now, guess what? We were bereft of the institutions that we once had to fight our side in that war of ideas, and thus the means had been destroyed.

Now the USIA was gone. Some of its functions were assimilated into the State Department. Broadcasting was brought under a broadcasting Board of Governors, including the Voice of America where I was and in my last year there I was the director of the Voice of America and we were in the process of eliminating our Arabic service, which was 12 hours a day of content rich discussions, reviews, editorials on U.S. policy to a pop music station called Radio Sawa, which began with 50 minutes in the hour broadcasting a melange of American pop music, JLo, Eminem, Britney Spears, and Arab pop music.

The chairman of the Board of Broadcasting and the chairman of the Mideast Committee of the board both paid the same remark to me separately to explain why we were doing this and this was the remark: MTV brought down the Berlin Wall. I waited a beat because I thought this has got to be a laugh line, and they did not laugh. They were serious. MTV brought down the Berlin [Wall]? MTV did not leak over into East Germany. I mean even that part of it was wrong, but having been a foot soldier in the Cold War myself, I seem to remember John Lenczowski's account of who won the Cold War, John Paul II and Ronald Reagan.

And how was the Cold War won? I remember distinctly in 1990 I used to read the Soviet press every day through FIBIS. I had prior met Alexander Yakovlev in Moscow, a member of the Politburo principally in charge of the promotion of and offensive Soviet ideology. The chief ideologue of the

Soviet Union and in the Soviet press in 1990 I read a statement by Yakovlev saying, “I have come to understand that Leninism is based upon class struggle and class hatred and that this is evil.”

It was in 1982 that President Reagan made his courageous statement to which John Lenczowski referred about the evil empire over which so many people in the West became apoplectic. Less than 10 years later semantic unanimity was achieved when the chief of Soviet ideology used the same term to describe that ideology as had Ronald Reagan. Semantic unanimity: applying words back to reality, achieve the end of the Cold War and I sent that statement around Washington by fax in those days – that is how primitive things were – saying it is over and indeed it was. We just witnessed over the following year the collapse of the Soviet Union, so what we need to achieve in this new war of ideas, ladies and gentlemen, is the Yakovlev moment.

I remember Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put out this famous snowflake message, “How do we know when we are winning? How do we know,” you know, are the number of terrorists we are killing- is that creating more terrorists than the number we are killing as if there could be some kind of quantitative standard by which you find out when you win a war of ideas. Well, ideas are not quantitative. They are qualitative and they are spiritual, so I use the Yakovlev moment as the means by which you could come to judge when you have won a war of ideas. John Lenczowski made a wonderful remark about the fact that it is we today who are seen as evil.

Who could have imagined during the Cold War when we used religion so effectively against the Soviet Union whether it was Jews in Russia, Muslims in Afghanistan, Catholics in Poland. It was any religion against the Soviet Union because it was atheistic – that now we would see religion turned against ourselves. We are now the ones defined as evil. I use this little remark in some of my lectures at the military academies with some of our seasoned officers all of whom have been in one or two wars and I asked them to tell me who made the following remark.

Quote: “This great America: what is its worth in the scale of human values and what does it add to the moral worth of humanity, and by journey’s end what will its contribution be? I fear that a balance may not exist between America’s material greatness and the quality of its people and I fear that the wheel of life will have turned and the book of time will have closed and America will have added nothing or next to nothing to the account of morals that distinguishes man from object and indeed, mankind from animals,” unquote.

Who said that? I have had some of our officers say well, that sounds like Churchill. The answer it is from Sayyid Qutb, the principal ideologue of the Islamist movement written in his Reflections: What I saw in America in the Early 1950s. I have much of this sort of material, which I will not read to you this afternoon because we do not have time, but the point- let the point be made that- that this is a moral attack on the United States. It is not a policy critique. There is no policy that we could change that would render, say, Sayyid Qutb’s judgement of us superfluous.

In the early ’50s, we were not known as supporting the Arab autocracies. Israel was not such a big issue back then, but you can find reflections of Qutb’s critique of us daily in the Muslim press. It is what animates and outrages the Muslim world against us, which has now successfully equated the United States with unbelief and we have reinforced that impression of ourselves by officially embracing and endorsing American pop culture as our own view of ourselves. How would you like to have an adolescent superpower neighborhood?

Well, let me move on here to the first duty of our public diplomacy, which therefore ought to be to answer this moral critique and that is what we ought to be focused on, and, of course, we are not. We do not have the institutions with which to do that and nor do we have the message. And let me move on now to the message.

Since we do not have public diplomacy anymore we can more or less just refer to the themes that President Obama has been offering the Arab and Muslim world about this new war of ideas. As he said in his inaugural address, our security emanates from the justness of our cause, so how is he presenting that to the Muslim world?

Well, his initial outreach as you know was in June of 2009, the famous speech in Cairo, which he gave immediately after having been in Accra, Ghana, where he gave a very tough love talk about African despotism and corruption and what needs to be done to have a true rule of law, democratic, constitutional order. It was a very good speech. It was a very tough speech.

However, immediately after, he goes to Cairo and he gives it a completely different kind of speech. Why did he do that? These hard truths were absent from his Cairo speech. In other words, he spoke powerfully to the poor and meekly to the powerful or truth to the poor and fantasy to the powerful. The differences were pronounced.

The only rhetorical strategy that can make sense of the Cairo speech is this: instead of confronting the unreality of the world in which most Arabs live, Obama decided to embrace it, enter into it, and then try to change it from within by changing the meaning of some words. As Egyptian writer and businessman Tariq Hagee said, "Why did he do that?" These hard truths were absent from his Cairo speech. In other words, he spoke powerfully to the poor and meekly to the powerful or truth to the poor and fantasy to the powerful. The differences were pronounced.

The only rhetorical strategy that can make sense of the Cairo speech is this: instead of confronting the unreality of the world in which most Arabs live, Obama decided to embrace it, enter into it, and then try to change it from within by changing the meaning of some words. As Egyptian writer and businessman Tariq Hagee said in reaction to the speech, quote, "It is as if he, Obama, is a magician," unquote. This magical approach produced [Obama]'s absurd claim that Al-Azhar, instead of being an intellectual backwater retarding the Muslim's ability to enter the modern world, was a light to the world and laid the foundations for the European Renaissance and Enlightenment.

There were other such gaffes. For instance, his praise of Muslim tolerance in Andalusia and Cordova during the Inquisition. However, the Muslim presence in Spain in the period of the Inquisition did not historically overlap, making the comparison ludicrous. There were other such examples, which I do not have time to go into and of course he lauded Bangladesh, Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia for having elected women heads of state and said we here in the United States are still struggling for women's equality. He proclaimed that quote, "In ancient times and in our times Muslim communities have been in the forefront of innovation and education."

As Stephen Ulph and Tawfiq Hamid know, the translation for innovation is *bida'ah*, which means heresy. I do not know how they translated it in his speech, but it is a very amusing [anecdote]. As the Arab Human Development reports from the UN (written all by Arabs) point out, the Arab educational system in the world today is the second worst. Next, the worst is sub-Saharan Africa, and next comes the education in the Arab world and they are a 'leader'. These distortions and fantasies were received with understandable enthusiasm by the audience.

Despite the absurdities of the remark obviously delivered is obsequious to the Arab world, the president did try to express and advance principles of equality and democracy within the Muslim world. However, he never mentioned any obstacle to those that might emanate from Islam itself. It is after all the dignity of all human beings to which he spoke, in which he vigorously espoused, that is at question in Islam according to its own revelation and legal doctrines, which are inimical to the proposition that all people are created equal.

Why not simply say this? Well, one reason he did not say it is because he holds the United States responsible for the problems within the Middle East. We are the victimizer, you are the victims. Once you enter the world of unreality in which Arabs live, accept it, embrace it, you then pretend that the United States is the problem and that none of these problems are indigenous and this was reflected throughout his policies: look away when the Iranian people are in the streets, demonstrating against a stolen election in hopes they will, out of gratitude, reach a nuclear compromise. The nature of the Iranian regime is irrelevant, so long as it does not possess nuclear weapons.

This ignores the fact that it is the nature of the Iranian regime which makes its possession of nuclear weapons a problem. Pretend that Syria is not subverting Iraq, your ally, and is implicit in killing American soldiers in that country and to merely turn away in hopes that by doing so Syria will give you a deal to stabilize Iraq and Lebanon. Pretend that Syrian President Bashar Assad is a reformer and perhaps he will become one.

This mistaken mission of giving Arabs a new vision of themselves from within their own delusional world was reflected in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent extraordinary remark about President Assad that what, quote, "We had tried to do with him is to give him an alternate vision of himself," unquote. Apparently, he has not embraced his doppelgänger and is perfectly content with his old self, which he maintains in power at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Syrian lives.

In other words, magic does not work in foreign policy. It is, in fact, just another version of realpolitik, which was exposed in the president's most recent speech to the Middle East in another famous example of his having led from behind in his belated endorsement of Arab revolutions. He did finally give a version of the tough love speech in Ghana, acknowledging the corruption and despotism in the Arab world and he also imagined that the Arab Spring means that the ideology of bin Laden is now obsolete. It is true that bin Laden's name was not chanted during any of the uprisings.

However, neither was the United States nor were there any statues of Liberty constructed as was famously the case in Tiananmen Square in 1989. In fact, the case could be made that the Arab Spring demonstrated the irrelevance of the United States more than it did Al Qaeda's. Obama's leading from behind did not impress this one Arab Muslim who said, "He should have said something from the beginning, but we have been waiting."

Most people have realized that what the United States does or does not do is no longer important because people took matters into their own hands and decided their own future, so why should people care what he says? America is no longer an issue and perhaps President Obama failed to notice that these uprisings have come close to achieving one of Al Qaeda's principal goals: the elimination of the apostate, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa.

What is to replace them is still very much up in the air. That is why bin Laden, in his posthumously broadcast audio tape, saw in the Arab Spring such potential for the achievement of Al Qaeda's aims.

That this might be the case did not seem to occur to President Obama other than by his saying that the changes made may not be to the immediate tactical advantage of the United States, which would nevertheless accept them if they were produced democratically. This is confusing process for substance.

Obama characterized the uprisings as democratically-inspired and therefore deserving of American support. What will happen, however, will very much depend on how Islam is understood in the respective countries of the Arab Spring. Curiously though, the word Islam did not appear once, not once in President Obama's [speech](#). Obama said that this is, quote, "a chance to pursue the world as it should be," unquote, "rather than as it is," but what the world should be is exactly what is at issue within Islam itself.

The President's speech assumed that Egyptian aspirations are identical to our own. However, one must ask whether the desired freedom is truly based upon the proposition that all people are created equal. How many Egyptians actually believe that Copts and Muslims, men and women, believers and non-believers are equal, to say nothing of Jews and Muslims? Where is the underlying support in their culture for the truth of this proposition? If it is not there, it will be freedom for some, and oppression for others.

I recently was watching an interview with Abu Jandal, who was Osama bin Laden's former bodyguard. He now lives in Yemen. This is such a wonderfully revealing remark. He said that, "Politics is illegitimate," quote, "for one reason. When you accept the other as he is, then you are in agreement with his infidelity and lowliness. If you accept the other as he is, then you are in agreement with his infidelity and lowliness," unquote. I think that means he does not believe all people were created equal, if I understand that remark right.

Well, pretending that this is not a problem does not make the problem magically go away. Assuming that the Arab Spring was a rejection of Bin Laden does not necessarily make it one. Dr. Tawfik Hamid, sitting with us here today, an Egyptian physician and penetrating analyst of Islamism, did an analysis of several thousand readers' comments on the webpages of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in response to the announcement of Bin Laden's death.

What did it reveal?

I am quoting Tawfik, "67% support for Bin Laden, 19% against Bin Laden, unclear answers, 14%," unquote. Bin Laden, after all, was just another product of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose spiritual leader, Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi, was recently welcomed in Tahrir Square by a gathering of millions. Speaking of current events, Naguib Sawiris, one of the founders of the Free Egyptian Party, had this to say, "They have substituted the dictatorship of Mubarak with a dictatorship of the Muslim Brotherhood. That is where Egypt is going now," unquote. What is Obama doing about this? He proposes some economic programs. I do not mean to gainsay those because the price of wheat has doubled in the last year and that by itself could derail any democratic transition in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East.

However, Obama listed in his speech a litany of human rights; of assembly, of religion, of expression, of the press, and so forth, which I believe is entirely inadequate to achieve the establishment of those. What is required is a natural theology to undergird them in a sincere examination of whether that natural theology is compatible with Islamic revelation. If it is not, it is not of course for a non-Muslim to answer the question as to whether it is or not, but it is perfectly appropriate, indeed vitally necessary, to pose it.

Muslim writer Irshad Manji, author of *The Trouble with Islam Today*, writes that, quote, “Bin Laden and his followers represent a real interpretation of Islam that begs be to challenged relentlessly and visibly,” as Patrick and Stephen told us this morning. Obama chooses not to do this, preferring to pretend that it has gone away. He seems to believe that speaking of it brings it into or at least sustains its existence while not speaking of it denies it existence.

This nominalist, or magical, approach is reflected in the tortured rhetoric of the Obama administration, used to portray the current conflict. I do not have to go through this. You know about, ‘Wars are not overseas contingency operations, terrorist attacks are man-made disasters.’ According to Mr. Clapper, the Muslim Brotherhood is a “[largely] secular” organization. According to Mr. Brennan, jihad – and this is worth quoting, “Jihad is a holy struggle, an effort to purify for a legitimate purpose.”

Conceding the legitimacy to your enemy in a war of ideas is not a good move, performing a lobotomy on yourself in a war of ideas. It is not a good move. Do not do these things.

Well, why the semantic obfuscation? Well, it exists today for the same reasons it existed during the Cold War, so I will not go into an analysis of that because it has been spoken of so brilliantly by John Moore and John Lenczowski, and it is also based upon the same problem of moral relativism that is reflected in Obama’s own writings where he said that the idea of liberty is there are no absolute truths. Truth does not free, truth imprisons. It is rigid, it cannot be changed, therefore there are no absolute truths.

Its confusion over these matters is a sure sign that the United States is suffering from the same kind of conflict within itself over the nature of the threat that it was facing during the Cold War. There exists the same reluctance to name things for what they are, and therefore to do the things that are necessary. How do you fashion a public diplomacy strategy based upon the belief that the United States does not represent any permanent truths?

During the Cold War, when we were suffering from this syndrome, we were a form of relativism fighting a form of absolutism. It is always the form of absolutism that has the upper advantage. Who wants to die to prove that nothing is absolutely true? How exactly is one supposed to promote this idea? By playing pop music and hoping the walls come tumbling down?

In the current war of ideas, we have lost the means and we have lost the message. We won the Cold War because we developed the means and we recovered the message. If we still have something to tell the world, if we still stand upon the embrace of a universal truth as the foundation of the justness of our cause, then we will be impelled to find the means to reach others with this truth. If not, we will have lost ourselves for reasons having nothing to do with the challenge of Islam.

Public diplomacy should aim for a new Yakovlev moment of semantic unanimity, a point at which the moral illegitimacy of the radical, Islamist vision is self-confessed, a point at which its adherents admit that its central tenets are evil. We cannot expect them to use this vocabulary if we do not. Thank you.